

Round Table "The future of libraries"

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The program of the conference was halfway through when a round table in which some of the invited speakers participated took place. As it was to be expected, it was named *The future of libraries*, and the speakers were Zuza Wiorogórska, Kristiina Kontiainen, Karen Hartman and Lluís Anglada. Since all of them conducted different talks and therefore appear repeatedly in this report, it seems unnecessary to state again their achievements thus making this text longer.

Instead of transcribing the round table, we intend to highlight the key ideas offered by the speakers under the point of view of the moderator, who also was the reporter of the event. For that reason, it might be interesting to read the conference tweetdoc¹ which contains most of the tweets that were written about the round table and other activities under the hashtag #b2029. In doing so, we can have a more general overview of what was said.

In this kind of round table, the first question that comes to mind is: "is it worth to ask ourselves about the future of libraries, seeing that thus far we have showed little accuracy in our predictions (the disappearance of libraries, the persistence of microfilming, the impossibility of large scale digitalizations, the short lifespan of CD-ROM...)"

However, we must admit that we have not been highly successful with our predictions, specially regarding the use of technology. Maybe because "there is at least one thing that is certain about libraries. It is the uncertainty of what they will become in the future (Moshe Safdie, architect)" (KHAN, 2009; p.1)

Nevertheless, as some authors point out (Staley and Malenfant, 2010), trying to approach the future of libraries is not useless. Identifying scenarios which are both of great impact and high likelihood forces us to take the necessary measures and incorporate them into our strategic planning. This prevision is not an exercise of futuristic fiction; it arises from merging present evidence (which allows us to infer future tendencies) and our sense of intuition. We are interpreting the signs in order to try to plan ahead for solutions and avoid threats, since "knowledge of the future is not empirical, but interpretive" (SLAUGHTER, 1995; p.32)²

That is why these experts met in the round table. They were offered a free-form intervention to be made before the debate about the future of libraries, but with the following suggested topics:

- ♦ The validity of libraries as physical space and new models of libraries (Idea stores, the Aarhus library, learning centers and learning commons).
- ♦ Collections, specially regarding the hot topic of managing e-books (property, loaning, etc.), and using

¹ Jornadas Bibliotecas 2029. 22 febrero 2013. <http://www.tweetdoc.org/View/53889/Jornadas-Bibliotecas-2029>

² Cit. by STALEY; MALENFANT, 2010

examples such as the County Library in Douglas, where agreements with publishing houses have been signed by the means of which they can buy e-books and host them in the library's server; or Project Califa in California, which is trying to imitate this.

- ♦ Public services offered from a hybrid environment, paper-based and digital, cooperative and with massive presence of mobile devices.
- ♦ The librarians' profession and how it assumes these challenges: cooperation, role as information mediator...

The speakers didn't address all these issues and they obviously couldn't discuss all the aspects of such a wide topic, but they did offer different considerations of great interest.

By order of intervention, first speaker Zuza Wiorogorska (University of Warsaw, Poland), focused on new professionals and their training. She pointed out that young librarians can decide the future of their libraries, therefore the great importance of their preparation. She highlighted the necessity to become international and look out, to the outer environment, presenting the key idea that the librarians' profession can be practiced anywhere in the world in the same way.

She also pointed out that these new librarians need great leadership abilities, coming from their experience but also from their training. Here she reminded us of the important role that library associations will have to play. She mentioned the great work on the future of libraries that CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals)³ is carrying out.

Furthermore, she presented the idea that the library is a brand with recognition, which provides us with a solid base for our development and competitiveness in an environment full of threats.

Kristiina Kontiainen (Association of Libraries, Finland) pointed out that there is a double point of view on the future of libraries. The first one (the pessimistic one), foresees a very strict copyright legislation, old-fashioned libraries which are neither useful nor necessary... etc. The second one (more optimistic), predicts "paradise inside the library and paradise of the libraries": spaces full of activity and noise, 365/24 opening hours, librarians cooperating with teachers, publishers and technologists; identical services in public and university libraries, working together for their own development, etc.

Nevertheless, she thinks that reality will fall somewhere in between these two points of view and that, more importantly, we, the librarians, have the future in our hands. In this point, we see she coincides with Zuza Wiorogórska, who said the same thing about young librarians. Thus, it will be us, the librarians, who will build either future with our actions, but keeping in mind that it will be determined by technology, which is unpredictable. We cannot anticipate the future, but we can work to be ready for it. The future is not imposed on us, it is our responsibility and we have to work on it.

Finally, she argued that the librarian's duty is unique, nobody else can carry it out and that we should communicate this to users and society. We have to make them believe and know that we are key.

Karen Hartman (U.S. Embassy, Rome) focused on various ideas about the role to be played by librarians in the future.

³ <http://www.cilip.org.uk/Pages/default.aspx>

She insisted on our duty on education, be it basic or permanent. Regarding this matter, she talked about the growth that unofficial and non-regulated training is experimenting, specially distance learning. She talked, for example, about the MOOC (Massive open online course)⁴ phenomenon and asked herself what were we, the librarians, doing about it.

Librarians should work with teachers and educators towards the development of skills that citizens and students need, since we, as librarians, have always been part of the education system. In order to achieve that, we can put our bets on this non-regulated kind of teaching. She pointed out that thirty states of the U.S. Are following the report *Museums, libraries and 21st Century Skills*⁵ written by the IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services), which gives libraries (and museums) an important role for the development of 21st century skills training networks.

She also offered the interesting idea that it is necessary to integrate librarians into work centers (companies, departments...) so that they offer task supports to these organizations (even if they actually work at a distance).

Generally speaking, her point of view was optimistic, but stressing the necessity of change and movement. We have collections and experts, which gives us great strength to face the future. As a final conclusion, she stressed once more the idea that we are responsible for the future, that we must defend the libraries.

Finally, Lluís Anglada (Consorti de Biblioteques Universitàries de Catalunya) spoke about the necessity of change in libraries as organizations, since they have a strong organizational component. He stressed that the greatness of the library lies in its multi-institutionality, that it offers deep services but that where we are strong we are maybe creating some weakness.

In this regard, he vouched for common work through association but without taking shelter in public administration but separating ourselves from it. However, there isn't a common European association frame, and it is necessary: we need a European Library Space because Europe is the future, and without Europe, we have no future. Without forgetting the great work that entities such as LIBER, which is training young leaders, are carrying out. We can highlight the coincidence between his opinion about LIBER's work with Zuzana's demand about training young librarians.

But we need something more powerful than LIBER. Something which is at the same level as our corporate partners: something global, similar to OCLC. Perhaps we should compromise our freedom in order to gain strength with a supra-entity.

Talking about these concepts of strengthening and common work, beyond cooperation, he offered the now recurring idea of convergence of professions related to cultural entities. He stated that it was a mistake to separate public libraries from university libraries and all of these from museums and archives..

These strong associations must allow us to highly improve our internal work, freeing us from routine tasks and making them better, richer. Even more, we must think about doing some things that nobody else is doing through common work.

He also suggested that maybe we should consider to make alliances with companies in our sector which, after all, have contributed to our development (for example with automated catalogues). This brought up an interesting debate. It was also stated that, on the contrary, we should confront these companies and their commercial resource's management policies.

⁴ Wikipedia: "Massive open online course". Wikipedia. 15 de febrero de 2012.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course

⁵ 15 de febrero de 2012. http://www.imls.gov/about/21st_century_skills_home.aspx

Interestingly, the financial crisis was hardly mentioned during the round table, even though finally they were asked about the prospects of small municipal libraries with regards to the cutbacks.

As we can see, the round table ended up being more of a discussion about the future of librarians than about the future of libraries, which is understandable if we think about the central idea that the future of libraries strongly depends on what we, librarians, want.

Bibliography

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