

## Filling in spaces: libraries as connecting tissue in a dense society

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### Empty libraries in 2029

If we have to imagine how libraries will be in twenty years, the image that comes to my mind is that of a reader blankly staring at empty bookshelves. Progressive digitalization of library documents (databases, magazines and books, in that order) must unavoidably lead to documentless libraries, which is to say, to empty and senseless libraries.

The image of the disappearance of libraries into the whirlwind of information digitalization has walked with me for a long part of my professional life. The nightmare was well captured by Steve Coffman<sup>1</sup> in an article which has drawn a justified level of attention. Coffman's basic point was the following: we librarians have been good at dreaming a digital library, our dreams have come true, but it wasn't us who materialized them.

Following Coffman: cataloguing of internet resources (set in motion from libraries by OCLC through the CORC project) has been taken into practice by Google, the construction of library 2.0 finally achieved outside of the library catalogues (Library Thing, Goodreads, Amazon), virtual references, despite the important library tradition, has been carried out by Wikipedia..

It's true, if libraries empty themselves of documents, and if we consider their function to be the conservation of these documents, libraries lose their function and in 2029 there won't be libraries. However, I think this point of view comes from a superficial assesment of the paradigm shift that the libraries are experiencing, and of the paradigm shift that is happening on a social level. Let's first talk about libraries.

A classic definition of library would be "an organised collection of information material which can be accessed by a group of patrons"<sup>2</sup>. Stress is on the documents, which we imagine in a physical state. The new paradigm of libraries seems to be drawn as a progressive substitution of print books into digital ones, but, as far as I'm concerned, the key point for reconfiguring the future won't be the format of information, but its value in a new social context.

We will see it later on, but let's try to shortly define it now. Information has traditionally been a scarce resource. Production of information increased since the invention of printing, but people's access to it has remained low.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Coffman, "The Decline and Fall of the Library Empire": Searcher 20(12)3. <http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr12/Coffman--The-Divine-and-Fall-of-the-Library-Empire.shtml>. Ver Que somien els bibliotecaris en biblioteques electròniques?, En: <http://bdig.blogspot.com.es/2012/05/que-somien-els-bibliotecaris-en.html>

<sup>2</sup> American Library Association

Subsequent technological innovations have diminished this shortage of access by diminishing the cost of documents (and even though the invention of printing is often mentioned as a turning point, maybe the mechanization of printing in the middle of the 19th century, with the appearance of continuous paper, typesetting and photoengraving, has had a bigger effect). Printed documents have been constantly improving technologically, which has diminished the cost of printing and information distribution, something which, in turn, has diminished the access difficulty, the scarcity.

This is the paradigm we are coming out from: one of scarce information, of restricted access. Also printed information, it's true, but this is circumstantial. Desire for information has also changed since Gutenberg until us (through the industrial revolution years). Libraries are not 'invented' to collect and keep printed documents, they are created to facilitate access to scarce information for an information hungry society<sup>3</sup>.

Hence, if it's appropriate to redefine libraries in the future, which certainly makes sense, it mustn't be through a new technological frame, but from a sociological one, and I'd even dare to say anthropological. Let's forget about document format and ask ourselves which needs were covered by the library and which ones must cover.

### **Information according to M. Buckland**

It will be useful to stop for a moment and look at the different meanings of the word 'information', according to Michael Buckland's article (1991)<sup>4</sup>. He makes a distinction between information-as-thing, information-as-process and information-as-knowledge. Even if the 'information' we are interested in is knowledge and the way we acquire it:

"some leading theorists have dismissed the attributive use of "information" to refer to things that are informative. However, "information-as-thing" deserves careful examination, partly because it is the only form of information with which information systems can deal directly<sup>5</sup>."

Modern libraries, which appeared in the second half of the 19th century, are based on the social need to access information that was becoming more and more relevant for work and city life. Modern libraries are built on the paradigm of scarce information, an information which -technologically speaking- is made on print. It's a library built around the book, in which the long-awaited access to information -knowledge- is made through a limited and scarce number of information-carrying objects.

It was a completely logical step for modern Library Science to focus its attention in maximizing the present and future uses of documents, in information-as-thing. The first and main obstacle which kept us from accessing information was the knowledge of its existence and the physical access to it. Facilitating the process of becoming informed has not been a priority.

But we are living a paradigm shift: information is becoming abundant, information which -technologically speaking- is produced and distributed digitally. Consequently, the attention of Library Science can now move along, focus on information-as-process and, to some extent, forget about information-as-thing.

### **Social paradigm shifts**

The agricultural revolution was technological, but it promoted a new society; the accumulation of new technological developments caused the industrial revolution, which is the name we use to designate the social order up to now;

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<sup>3</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, "La misión del bibliotecario" (México D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Michael K. Buckland "Information as Thing", en: JASIS 42(91)5, p. 351-360.

<sup>5</sup> Buckland, op cit, p. 359.

similarly, according to Manuel Castells<sup>6</sup>, new technological developments in the field of computers and telecommunications are promoting the birth of a new society, the information society.

Technological changes are decisive, but their immediate consequences are superficial, at least when compared with their deep consequences, which can sometimes alter the way humans organise themselves, produce and live. Castells symbolised the social paradigm shift with the decline of tree-like organisations and the rise of network-like organisations. Jeremy Rifkin speaks about a third industrial revolution in which lateral power is transforming energy, economy and the world:

"The partial shift from markets to networks establishes a different business orientation. The adversarial relationship between sellers and buyers is replaced by a collaborative relationship between suppliers and users. Self-interest is subsumed by shared interest. Proprietary information is eclipsed by a new emphasis on openness and collective trust. The new focus on transparency over secrecy is based on the premise that adding value to the network doesn't depreciate one's own stock, but, rather, appreciates everyone's holdings as equal nodes in a common endeavor"<sup>7</sup>.

Computers and the Internet are favouring the appearance of new ways to organise production, and this is, in turn, promoting new ways of consumption. Society globalises and the Earth flattens (Thomas Friedman<sup>8</sup>) and the golden rule which orders to concentrate in a given space the best selling products is subverted by the appearance in the Internet of the long tail phenomenon (Chris Anderson)<sup>9</sup>.

It seems clear that our evolution as a species has walked besides our social skills. As E. Wilson<sup>10</sup> points out, there is no other species (with the exception of ants and termites) which has been able to create social groups which are as big as the ones we humans have. This is based on coevolutionary processes which have favoured the selection of characteristics that strengthen social cohesion and extension elements. This is reflected on the physiological changes on our brains which allow us to keep relationships with a numerous kin. (see Robin Dunbar).

As far as I'm concerned, a new social frame is being created in which the key concepts are "networks", "cooperation", "globalisation", "diversity", and "socialization", contrary to the dominant and antagonistic concepts of industrial society (namely: vertical hierarchy, competition, closed markets, homogeneity, individualism).

We must redefine (refill) libraries not based on a new technological frame, but on a new sociological (anthropological?) frame. Within this new social frame, and by reviewing the needs that libraries used to cover, we must ask ourselves, which are the needs that libraries must cover?

### **Filling in (empty) spaces**

If we cling to the traditional image of a book-dispensing library (that is, an instrument for information access), the concept of "library" is going to become empty of content, since it is rooted on a decaying social need (or one which is in its path to extinction). A report about the future of Dutch public libraries says:

"The likelihood of a decline in support for public libraries over the next ten years does not of course mean that this

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<sup>6</sup> Manuel Castells, "La sociedad de la información" (Madrid: Alianza, 1997-97), 3 v.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, "The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Friedman, "La Tierra es plana : breve historia del mundo globalizado del siglo XXI" (Madrid: Martínez Roca, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Chris Anderson, "La economía long tail: de los mercados de masas al triunfo de lo minoritario" (Argentina, etc. : Tendencias Editoriales, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Edward O. Wilson, "La conquista social de la tierra: ¿De Dónde Venimos? ¿Quiénes Somos? ¿Adónde vamos?" (Barcelona: Debate, 2012).

is a desirable development. The undesirability of such a trend lies not so much in the consequences for 'the public library' as an institution itself, but in the social functions it fulfills<sup>11</sup>.

Analists from all over agree in choosing growing inequality between members of the same social group as one of the most important problems of our society<sup>12</sup>. Tony Judt says:

"Growing inequality inside and between societies is which is causing so many social pathologies. Ridiculously unequal societies are also unstable. This creates internal divisions and, sooner or later, internal fights, of which the ending is often non-democratic<sup>13</sup>".

As I understand it, we must look for a new foundation of libraries in a new social need, which is no longer to access scarce information (this characteristic has ceased to be dominant) but to reduce inequality (that is, to fill in spaces). This is usually simplified by saying that libraries have a big role in bridging the digital gap. It certainly is so, but their role is bigger than this. Markets (mercantilism) has flaws (holes), and the function of libraries is to fill in information-related holes.

There are three ways we can achieve this: we can fill in spaces (holes) with more information-object, with new processes and functions or by thinking of new uses for libraries<sup>14</sup>.

To say that what defines current information is not its scarcity or access problems is not the same as saying that every piece of information is easy to access. Recovering the concept of long tails we can think that a significant amount of the information that mankind produces will be easy to access and (probably) affordable. But this will neither happen for all of information nor to the same extent for everybody. As the scientific community is working on accessing the most relevant scientific information and commercial interests also promote the access to leisure or training information, there will be orphan information.

Information with low commercial interest, that produced by minorities or that which doesn't offer immediate advantages won't find shelter anywhere unless libraries embrace it. We could follow a similar reasoning in order to state that only libraries are ready to guarantee permanent access to information. Let's finish by adding that information accessibility (for present or future use) will depend on its contextualization, on adding metadata, a task for which libraries are ready and which will be able to carry out if they take on new roles.

Filling in our libraries with new processes and functions means to dig deeper into information literacy and reading promotion tasks. Many brilliant colleagues have written about this in a much better way than whatever I can do here, so I will not insist. However, I do want to stress that redefining the function of libraries goes far beyond the tasks which attempt to bridge the digital gap. It would be very interesting to explore "The Atlas of New Librarianship" by R.David Lankes<sup>15</sup> and to reflect about the mission he proposes for libraries: to make society better through the facilitation of knowledge production in its communities<sup>16</sup>.

Lastly, the third way of re-establishing libraries would imply filling in existing holes with new uses. Grossly, we can

<sup>11</sup> F. Huysmans & C. Hillebrink, "The future of the Dutch public library: Ten years on". (The Hague, Netherlands: Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Daron Acemoglu y James A. Robinson, James, "Por qué fracasan los países : los orígenes del poder, la prosperidad y la pobreza" (Barcelona: Deusto, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Tony Judt, "Algo va mal" (Madrid: Taurus, 2010). ISBN 843060796X.

<sup>14</sup> This is not Coffman's opinion, see: <http://bdig.blogspot.com.es/2012/11/criticas-excelentes-alternativas.html>

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, c2011.

<sup>16</sup> "The MISSION of LIBRARIANS is to IMPROVE SOCIETY through FACILITATING KNOWLEDGE CREATION in their COMMUNITIES". [http://www.newlibrarianship.org/wordpress/?page\\_id=16](http://www.newlibrarianship.org/wordpress/?page_id=16)

think of libraries as a third space, following Ray Oldenburg, but it seems that the objectives of the physical rebuilding of libraries should be social integration, trust-building and social capital production<sup>17</sup>.

### **Libraries in a dense society.**

In mathematics they use the concept of a dense space. That would roughly be a space in which, between any two given elements, we can find a third one. One of the main obstacles that prevent us from keeping on developing as a species (that is, making our life conditions better) is the polarisation of our society. This fact can be tinged with economical, cultural or group colours, but the result is always the separation between the constituent parts (people) and the creation of some big and (almost) empty spaces, the creation of non-dense spaces. I think the great function for future libraries is to fill in these spaces.

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<sup>17</sup> i.e.: Henrik Jochumsen, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Dorte Skot-Hansen, "The four spaces - a new model for the public library": *New Library World*, 113(12)11, p. 586 – 597; Christine Rooney-Browne, David McMenemy, "Public libraries as impartial spaces in a consumer society: possible, plausible, desirable?", *New Library World*, Vol. 111(10)11, p. 455 – 467; or, Andreas Vårheim, Sven Steinmo, Eisaku Ide, "Do libraries matter? Public libraries and the creation of social capital": *Journal of Documentation*, 64(08)6, p. 877 - 892.

