

The Academic Library in the Virtual World

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Introduction

There is no need to retell the fact that library and information science (LIS) is in a time of transition, changing from a mere sub-discipline of social sciences or humanities (depending on classifications) into an interdisciplinary field gathering up slender threads of all possible scientific disciplines. Questions about future research trends and topics are arising, and it seems there is no one answer concerning the future of LIS. How can anyone predict the possible changes following the outcomes of e.g. biometric research of information behaviour? How to integrate ethnographic research methods into evaluation of library services? And the most important question: is there a future for library and information work? Although libraries of all types must reshape their services (and a lot of them are doing it), to me their future seems brighter than it might appear.

Before I go into some thoughts about future of the library and information work, some general remarks are needed. Firstly, this article does not have the character of a journal article in the meaning of scientific publishing; it is just an essay. Secondly, due to space limitations, some choices had to be made. That is why I would like to present some opinions about academic libraries and their future, as well as about library services. And

last but not least, my aim is to indicate some promising aspects of the future of libraries.

New is the new black

For centuries, the appearance of new media has raised concerns about the future of communication, science, and even mankind as a whole. In *Phaedrus*, written around 370 BC by Plato (1958), in notes 49–51 we can read a brief legend that critically comments on the gift of writing to the Egyptians from the god Theuth: Socrates, who is recounting the legend, states that although writing might be an opportunity for reminding, it is a threat for remembering and wisdom. In addition, he says that writing is silent: it cannot answer questions, speak, or come to its own defence. Therefore it is a tool, rather than a new medium, because as such it could be threatening our ability to think and to understand. This seems to be the oldest record of such anxieties. Any further invention of new media in some sense was perceived, at least by some, as a threat to the existing ones: radio to newspapers, cinemas to theatres, TVs to cinemas, computers to books and TVs. Throughout the history of social communication, all anxieties were reasonable, but turned out to be premature.



146

Incorporation of virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) solutions into library services is just a matter of time.

For tens of centuries any person who aspired to the intellectual elite had to visit a library to gain access to needed information. Archives, libraries and collections of royal households, parliaments, universities, or schools of any type were gateways to the necessary knowledge. There was no other way to intellectual enlightenment than through the library door. In the mid-80s of the 20th century, David Bolter wrote “Turing’s Man”, an insightful reflection on possible changes in culture on its deepest levels. Bolter was deliberating *inter alia* on the future role of computers in science, arguing that they had not yet found their role in the humanities and art. Nevertheless, he assumed that in some future we might expect that writers and historians as well as engineers and naturalists would use computers in their work as a natural means of communication for researchers from Europe and North America. He also states that it is possible for the libraries to store documents on electronic carriers and share them via computer (Bolter, 1990). Nowadays, it is enough for a student to reach into his or her pocket for a smartphone to do the same.

In the 21st century we live in a reality of media convergence where all forms of communication are melting together, creating new qualities both for users and researchers

(Jenkins, 2007)—and for librarians as well. Therefore, it is indisputable that libraries of all types, like all other institutions, are in new circumstances that are shaping their patrons’ needs in unknown ways. We might say that in the world of new media, the only permanent and unquestionable thing is change.

Communal activities in academic libraries

In 2015 in Poland (last accessible statistical data) there were 9710 libraries, including 8050 public libraries and 1001 scientific libraries (a statistical category that includes academic libraries and, for example, libraries of scientific institutes). Since 2014, there has been a decline in the number of scientific libraries (by 42) and users (by 4%). In 2015 there were almost 1,5 million users of that type of libraries registered. Though numbers showing a declining tendency are worrisome, strong representation of electronic resources is a very important aspect of changes in the academic libraries. In 2015 Polish scientific libraries offered over 26 million electronic resources of various types (e-books, databases, repositories), representing over 90% of all resources of that type in all of Poland at the time (*Stan bibliotek*, 2015).

SHORT

ARTICLES

CULTURAL HERITAGE

REAL AND VIRTUAL

In this context, the question must be asked: why visit an academic library when all needed resources are accessible online? In his article a decade ago, Jeffrey T. Gayton analysed the changing roles of academic libraries, especially their “social” role that can be observed in the introduction of “non-library” services such as cafes, group study places, and exhibitions. He comments critically on the idea of social activities in academic libraries, and compares it with the experience of communal activity: *There is a profound difference between a space in which library users are engaged in social activity and a space in which they are engaged in communal activity. Social activity in a library involves conversation and discussion among people, about either the work at hand or more trivial matters. Communal activity in a library involves seeing and being seen quietly engaged in study* (Gayton, 2008). The possibility of quiet learning in friendly surroundings is the main benefit and attraction for students and for younger faculty (Freeman, 2005). The same advantage is significant for younger faculty staff: although older faculty place greater value on print resources, their use of the library for study and research is relatively limited. It is younger faculty, even with their greater reliance on electronic resources, who value the academic library as a place for research and scholarship (Antell & Engel, 2006).

Fig. 1. Communal space at Warsaw University Library. Photo by Maria Śliwińska



Nowadays, almost the same questions must be asked: Where are we ten years later? Do students still need any libraries? Last year Christian Lauersen, director of Roskilde University Library, The Faculty Library of Social Sciences, was wondering why students visit university libraries: *Why do they come? Why don't they sit at home and study?* (Lauersen, 2017). In his blog posts, he presented some remarks in that regard. In his opinion, the library is a trustworthy brand, and like every brand it represents a set of values: openness, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Lauersen's opinion is that students may not love libraries, but they respect them for their values. *Libraries don't want people's money—libraries want them to succeed, want them to learn, to explore, want to give them access to a bigger world* (Lauersen, 2017). Moreover, libraries still offer a place to study—a comfortable space,



148



where students and faculty can learn and work, alone together, without the distractions and duties of home.

The Library as Place



Fig. 2. The library as a place. Source: <https://christianlauersen.net/2017/07/07/is-a-library-without-books-still-a-library/>

Equally important, academia needed and still needs a place to work, study, learn, and meet, to discuss, polemicize, and criticize. For centuries, the library was the place to do so—or at least the starting point for such activities. I am confident that, for years to come, university libraries as places are safe and sound. This is in line with the concept of Oldenburg’s third place, which is defined as any informal gathering place in which people meet between home and work. He writes: *In order for the city and its neighbourhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and potential, there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather. There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which no one is required to play host, and in which we all feel at home and comfortable* (Oldenburg, 1999). This diagnosis seems to be adequate in the

case of the University of Warsaw Library: a library that is vibrant with students and faculty doing their research—both in quiet reading rooms and in shared learning rooms that offer a chance for discussions and comments. One of the Library’s actions is especially popular among the students: during exam sessions, the library is open all night, closing just as the first city bus becomes available in the morning. Thanks to that initiative, night-learners have a chance to prepare for exams, but it seems the interest exceeds the number of students who learn best at night. It is worth mentioning that this seems to be a promising trend in Polish academic libraries: The Library of the Warsaw School of Economics also offers late night opening hours (open until 5 a.m.—in 2015 it was promoted with a hashtag #inSGHomnia) as well as the Library of the University of Lodz (open until midnight).

Late opening hours are just one sign of a very important approach—client-oriented management. In this approach, a library’s main focus is on the needs of its patrons—for an academic library, its students and faculty staff. That is why libraries try to meet the various needs of their users in terms of both services and equipment. For example, at the Library of Lodz University of Technology, students and employees can use a 3D printer. In my opinion, this is just

a beginning. Incorporation of virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) solutions into library services is just a matter of time, and we could expect that patrons will want to use those technologies in the process of studying. We should be ready for new opportunities that virtual reality will create for learning at universities—for now, we know that children can concentrate 15 minutes longer when they are immersed in VR while the teacher is explaining, for example, how a volcano works. I can easily imagine medical students taking part in virtual operations, or anthropology students visiting distant cultures in VR glasses. Of course, a question can be asked about the boundaries of studying: should it be tied to classrooms and assembly halls? Past experience with e-learning seems to indicate the opposite.

Facing virtual reality

A sign of how of LIS and VR/AR solutions are converging may be seen in the foundation of the Centre of Media Analysis at the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies at the University of Warsaw. The Centre is an innovative, technically advanced science and research laboratory that carries out research connecting social sciences, humanities, and technology with an interdisciplinary team of specialists—

more than a dozen media experts, linguists, psychologists, sociologists, information specialists, political scientists and statisticians. Each member of the team has many years of experience in conducting both scientific and commercial projects. The laboratory runs a comprehensive and multidisciplinary research and expertise service that promotes the acquisition of competitive advantage—especially in the knowledge-based economy developed in Poland and in the world. It is expected that research experience will allow us to enrich our curricula in the coming years and prepare LIS students for the challenges of the future.

Conclusions

Moving forward to the conclusions, I think that there are two main phenomena that shape academic libraries: virtual resources and physical places. The existence and use of both is indisputable, but the question is what the link is between them.

There is no doubt that effective and efficient use of new media needs new skills. Among these, information literacy—understood as the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand—has





Fig. 3. Recreation area—a botanical garden on the roof of the Warsaw University Library. Photo by Piotr Koźurno



an exceptional meaning. Here libraries, especially academic ones, have a leading role to play. There is a growing need for information specialists and their guidance in the world of electronic resources—both in private and academic life. But in times when students do not need to visit libraries to read because all they need is available online, the role of the librarians is new and demanding. They need to show, train, and guide users—both students and staff—through electronic resources of all types: databases, e-books, repositories, online archives.

Library spaces—those spaces of learning together alone—are natural rooms for such activities. Students and staff who come to use the communal space are “easy victims” for information literacy training in

all possible dimensions: how to use electronic resources, how to manage personal space in a virtual world, how to support a student’s life with digital technologies (in some other way than just on Facebook). The possibilities seem to be limitless—just like the development of new technologies.

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